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IDEALS OF DEMOCRACY IN ENGLAND.

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THE meaning of the word democracy in modern times appears to indicate the recognition in custom or in law of the common qualities of all the men and women of a group. But this similarity or "equality" is vaguely conceived, for the word democracy now has two quite distinct meanings. A particular kind of political organisation may be called a democracy; and this is quite distinct from the social atmosphere which is also called democracy. Society may be democratic in its general feeling and yet may not be organised politically according to any principle of equality. But the two meanings of the word democracy are closely connected. We shall suppose here that a democratic atmosphere implies certain accepted ideals of life and character and that democratic political organisation is a method by which such ideals may be reached. Democracy exists where social action is based upon the fundamental common qualities of all men and women, although it does not involve the denial of differences in genius or character. The emphasis is put upon a common humanity, and this is not forgotten when, for special purposes, special ability is recognised. But democracy is nowhere achieved, since nearly all our inherited social structure is based upon the subordination of a common humanity to the differences within the group. Democracy therefore remains an unachieved ideal, and those who hope for or work for democracy aim in every country at emphasising the importance of the human being however foolish or incompetent.

Much of what is hoped for in England, by those who desire a freer and finer life than is at present possible, is not peculiar to England: for the attempt to secure for all social classes political equality or equality in the eyes of the law

is common wherever any political advance is made. When therefore we attempt to analyse and to estimate the democratic ideals of England alone we do not imply any forgetfulness of the common democratic ideals in every land. We shall emphasise what seems to be characteristic of England, without neglecting what is shared by France and the United States: and we shall discuss the ideal of English democracy not as though it were a segregate desire for a purely national or party gain but with a view to the contribution England may make to the general advance of all human life. For an ideal is not a private possession of any group and no progressive ideal is aimed at the advantage of one group over another. We shall discuss within these limits, then, first the social ideals of democracy in England and, secondly, the political machinery which has been adopted for securing a recognition of "the rights of man."

What is it that England hopes for in social life? If one were to judge from the press and the talk of the drawing-rooms, the ideal of most Englishmen would seem to be either proximity to a titled non-entity or empty-headed acquiescence in what exists. If even one confined one's questioning to London, social ideals would seem to be meagre and commonplace. But fortunately London is not England: nor is the rest of England merely "provinces." The vigour of social idealism is in the Midlands and in the North of England; and an analysis of English tendencies towards democracy must be based upon experience and understanding of Manchester and Bradford and Newcastle. For in the first place the social ideals of Brighton or of three quarters of London are anti-democratic: or if they are called democratic, it is the democracy hoped for by officials. And if London were England there is little doubt that we should soon have established an absolute bureaucracy, dominating a subservient and even an admiring populace, with the assistance of an inconsequent and ignorant literary clique. The social atmosphere of the South of England is not in fact democratic and there is no general

desire to make it so: but in the Midlands and in the North there is a different feeling in social life and such beginnings of democracy as are to be found there are generally valued. It is from such evidence, therefore, that we must judge the character and quality of the English ideal, omitting the abstract admirations of philosophers and the unmeaning generalities of journalism.

The basis of English democratic ideals is the admiration for persons who are doing something which is useful to someone else. This is an ideal of character: and it easily connects with the conceptions of life according to which any real work is of about equal importance with any other. To many the idealisation of work having social effects may seem dismal; and the idea of the workman being equal in any way to the manager may seem a mere perversity. But let us discuss objections to the ideal afterwards. We must first appreciate the power that such social ideals have upon those in whose hands is the future of England. For, whether gentlemen or not, those who are vacant of any purpose will have comparatively little effect upon succeeding generations: and the only vigorous feeling in England seems to be in the direction of democracy. The common man is not ashamed of his position and he increasingly expects to be treated as though his humanity were more important than his income or his relatives.

Democracy as a social atmosphere once meant a surly opposition to established privileges. But the early days of democracy are over: and for the better sort it now means a sharing of responsibility by all the members of society. This is the meaning it bears in the North and in the Midlands, not only among the few competent thinkers, but also with the hard-headed majority. What seems to be most resented is that any person or class should "get out of it" when there is a social difficulty to be overcome or a social task to be performed. There is no general feeling against differences of income, if every man does his part and pays his share. And even the plain-spoken sarcasms of the trade unionists against the very comfortable "duties"

assumed by the rich do not imply jealousy of wealth so much as disdain for idleness; although it is clearly implied in a democratic atmosphere that great differences of wealth and well-being are obstacles to work for social ends, since the very rich do not feel their dependence upon their fellows and the very poor have neither time nor energy to work for anything but bare subsistence. In a democratic atmosphere the "social conscience" flourishes: and by that we mean the feeling of responsibility for human suffering and social confusion. For it is true that the social conscience is sometimes a sort of rich man's goad; and what are called the "better" classes have often been moved during the nineteenth century by pity for disease and poverty. But this form of social conscience is a condescension and it is never very effective. It breeds only a spare-time charity. The same feeling for poverty and disease takes root more securely in a society whose members feel their near relationship to the sufferers. For when a democracy is stirred by the sight of starving childhood and helpless age its action is not a spare-time hobby but part of its daily work.

In England at least a democratic society is imagined to be one in which there are none so rich as to be enforced idlers and none so poor as to be only workers. Thus, even apart from political action, a certain change is proceeding in the social habits of Englishmen, and although it sometimes takes a trivial form in rudeness of manner to anyone who seems "superior," it is quite definitely based upon the ideal principle that men and women are not and cannot be the mere recipients of "charity." To repudiate condescension is not to deny the value of benevolence; but in a democratic social atmosphere it becomes increasingly impossible to suppose that any men and women, however poor or uneducated, can be regarded as "interesting specimens" for the activities of the "charitable." The older structure of society, however, made the fortune and the happiness of the greater number depend upon the kindness of a few; and although when the few are benevolent the result is

good, it is now felt that social life cannot be securely based upon the hope of virtue in those who have all the power.

Such a statement is obviously too abstract to be recognised by the average democrat of the North and the Midlands as the real basis of his action and his habits of mind. For the English do not take kindly to general theories. In France a word like fraternity and an elaborate social theory to explain it are the points of departure for social action and in England also a theory is accepted when practice is changed: but in England the theory is not analysed or even generally accepted, although new and revolutionary social attitudes may be adopted. At its best, therefore, we may admit that the vague feeling of social equality and of "rights" as opposed to condescension point only to an ideal of freer intercourse and equal consideration between all English men and women. The first necessity in a purely democratic atmosphere is that work should be done, if poverty and disease are to be controlled; and it offends those whose aim is to produce a better future to see idleness or selfish cunning. This does not imply that anyone who is moved by a democratic ideal in England is so foolish as to imagine that all the poor are virtuous and all the leisured class are vicious. In spite of the occasional violences of a tub-thumper, we are living down the old doctrines of the class war. For it is a system, not persons, that must be opposed; and the purpose of democracy in the widest social sense is to create a new system, not to "convert sinners." The short speeches which one may hear at some meeting of railwaymen, for example, are not concerned with personal hatreds but with broader issues of policy and social custom. And the forward-looking few in England have with them a dumb majority who can see well enough that the age of privileged leisure must give place to the age of equal labour for the common good. There is still too much to be opposed in the conventions of society, the nepotism and favouritism of the ruling classes and the general waste of intelligence, for the ideal aimed at to be the centre of common interest and therefore that ideal is not clearly conceived.

But it is easy to obtain a response from any group of those who aim at democracy if the Utopias are described in which what are now the privileges of leisure,—music, painting and the rest, are imagined to belong by right to those who work.

In the second place, democracy in England involves a sense of the equal value of work well done. This appears to the aristocratic as a mere barbarism among working-men: for it is easy to show that a great thinker or administrator has more social value than a brick-layer. And yet the general tone, in Northern England at least, seems to imply some feeling of equality between workman and organiser. This, in its best meaning, indicates only the sense that no good work is dishonourable. It is to be understood by contrast, for instance, with the feeling of an aristocratic society that certain kinds of work are "beneath us." If we are to refer to ancient society, the Greek conception of the degradation involved in manual labour is the most clearly contrasted example of aristocratic social standards. In modern times the stigma attached to "trade" in an undemocratic society is the most common form of the same social ideal. But a democratic ideal implies that differences in the work done should not obscure the fundamental value of all work which is necessary. Thus, in its best meaning, the democratic feeling of the equal value of all good work does not imply the denial of a superior value to intelligence. The point is that so long as the work is honest and necessary it is equal with all other such work in being socially good, and that alone is the ground for the workman's confidence in himself. But those who have a democratic social ideal go somewhat beyond the present accepted status of labour and look to the general acceptance in social life of the value and importance of the supply of the simpler needs of society. Democratic England may yet achieve the redemption of the manhood and womanhood in the factory hand and the agricultural labourer; and this redemption must depend as much upon new social standards as upon political reform.

The ideal implied in all this social feeling is in many ways peculiar to England. There is the same feeling for equality of work in the United States, and in France there is the same admiration for the man who does work with social effects. But in England, in the first place, the ideal does not involve a denial of social differences so long as these are not differences of rank. There is a feeling of the engineers and of the merchants and of the railwaymen. The type of work done by each remains always in evidence when several men meet together and no man remains just a man without being also either a railwayman or a carpenter. There is in England an inherited sense of the "craftsman" which may yet serve to revive a form of the old guild system.

Thus English democracy escapes that sense of monotonous uniformity which Emile Faguet, for example, finds so offensive in the French ideal. And although the opponent of democracy in France may exaggerate the tendency to monotony, in general it seems true that there remains more feeling in England than in France for individual differences within the common humanity.

In the third place, English democratic atmosphere has still a place for the "sporting instinct" which it has derived from the aristocratic atmosphere of England in earlier days. The working-man has his racing dogs: and he attends football matches assiduously. This may be counted as a weakness both by those who want him to "save" and by those who want him to shoot: but, for good or evil, English social ideals of the democratic kind never have repudiated the English delight in "sport." For our present purpose, "sport" indicates an important difference in the English conception of work for social good. English democratic ideals are more light-hearted and less solemn than the French. The admiration for a man who works does not imply any appreciation of a "dull dog" or a machine or even a solemn reformer. This makes the democrats of the European continent often regard the English democrat as not in earnest or as feather-brained or reckless.

For the Continental democrat has not yet learned to laugh at the solemnities which surround any high-flown gospel; and a real strength comes to the English from the possibility of self-criticism which is implied in turning solemnities to laughter, and relieving labour with sport.

When Lord Granville was finding it difficult to be a peer and a Liberal, one of the sarcasms levelled against his party was that they were not sportsmen. And so important did Lord Granville think the charge that he offered to refute it by riding across country against any Tory peers. He rightly felt that votes might be lost in England even among the democracy if a party consisted of milksops or doctrinaires. There was, naturally, a touch of flunkeyism in the feeling of Liberals that what Tory peers could do was the sign of a gentleman: but there was also a sane prejudice in favour of the man whose ideas did not make him too solemn.

We may now turn to democracy in the purely political sense of the word. It is unnecessary to analyse its development, but clearly any judgment of present tendencies must depend upon the analysis of changes which have occurred within the last fifty years. From these we should best discover the aim of the majority of Englishmen. It is acknowledged that much remains to be done that all may share fairly in the benefits of political order and that all may have the opportunity for a free development of their abilities; but the ground has been broken and we have secured a political advance upon which we can depend. Not even the recent set-back to democratic tendencies can quite abolish what has been achieved since 1830.

But the ideals of political democracy in England seem to involve chiefly (1) the desire to modify the present representative system and (2) the desire to give freer access to land and the means of production. The representative system will have to be changed so that the representatives are not all of one social class, the rich. At present even when the representative is "democratic" in sentiment he

is seldom one of the class he represents: and the reason is purely economic. Election expenses and the necessity of subscribing to clubs and charities make it practically impossible for anyone to have direct political power who is not wealthy. Practically the Labour Party cannot contest an election except in constituencies in which there is a likelihood that they will be successful. And even where expenses are paid by a party, the representative is so dependent on this source of income that he is cut off by it from his constituents and his own ideas. There is no reason why the state should not guarantee election expenses, and forbid too large an expenditure. For the ideal of political democracy must clearly involve some reform by which political ability may be given its due place without the assistance either of private wealth or party funds.

Free access to the land is another aim of English political democracy. We are still too much hedged about by mediævalism, and the new financial sources of wealth only serve to fasten more securely the power of land-ownership upon the homes of common men. Again, no one supposes that landowners are necessarily villains. It is the system which is at fault: and however admirable it may have been—if it ever was—in earlier days, it is a mere obstacle to freedom and bodily health in these days of vast city regions. A few months before the war, therefore, the democratic movement in England was concentrating attention upon the land problem: and after the war the problem will be with us again. The political ideal at work is not the mere substitution of small owners for large owners, but the recognition by the state that land should not be a form of private property, any more than are water or air.

We put these reforms in the first place because they are the most striking of those implied in the new ideals of democracy in England. But the English conception of political democracy is very well seen in some older and already accepted practices. The increase of local government and of local responsibility has been almost peculiar to England during the last fifty years: for in spite of the great

development of municipal control in Germany and the enthusiasm for "regionalism" in France, England seems to have produced a certain political independence of localities which may be very important in the future for the general problem of devolution or decentralisation in large states. Local political vitality seems to be essential for any real democracy in the vast states of modern times; and this has been felt most of all in the United States, but in the second place most clearly in England. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 began the acknowledged policy, and there are now about one hundred and fifty complete municipalities. On such local bodies depend the management of some supplies, the regulation of part of the system of education, and the control of poverty and disease. Even the much-abused Tribunal system under the recent Military Service Acts is a sign of the English attempt to administer by reference to local needs and, where possible, through local residents. And we may contrast this tendency with the other political system in which as much administration as possible is done by officials sent down from the centre of state-government. For although there is a certain proportion of centralised administration in England it is less than in almost every country but the United States. And in England pre-eminently local interests are definitely political; so that often the details of municipal policy provide the material for training those who eventually deal with the political organisation of the whole state.

Secondly, political democracy in England is expressed in the many Acts for the regulation of the conditions of labour and the support of those social or economic classes which are normally the sufferers in the present world. Since the Factory Acts of the early nineteenth century, the power of the state has been more and more used to control the base greed of gain which is called the economic "law" of competition. The regulations as to the labour of women and children, as to the responsibility of employers and as to insurance, are all sufficiently known, and they all point in

one direction. They are all in the interests of one social class, if we must speak in the crude language of "interests." But they are obviously not instances of benevolence, for they are in fact the expression of a growing understanding of the nature and purpose of political government. To what do they point?

Rousseau said long ago that political government was aimed at correcting the crude differences of "natural" inequality in health or strength or parentage or external circumstances in order that the more important and valuable differences of character and intelligence might have free play in society. Government was not to make all men similar, but to correct such dissimilarities as are important only to beasts. By the state man rose to manhood: and the state should therefore not confirm but correct the social and economic structure into which we have been born. This theory was a generous prevision of a possible state-system, but neither then nor now is it a description of any actual state. The same theory lives on as a vaguely conceived ideal in the English efforts at industrial legislation; and we are clearly aiming at the democratic end of securing for every man and woman as much human life as is possible without subverting the whole of our inherited methods of government.

Finally, the trade union movement in England shows the characteristic ideals of democratic England, in their strength and in their weakness. For English trade unionism as a political force has all the strength of self-confidence. Its members are not inclined any longer to be afraid of their own power and although the majority may be uncertain in what direction that power should be used, the attitude of trade unionism is no longer apologetic or timorous. That shows the better side of the English aspirations towards democracy. But trade unionism, like English democracy in general, is deficient first in its incurable separatism and secondly in its lack of appreciation for intelligence and intellectual qualities. The unions are not really at one in any great principle of social policy and

in their struggle with capital they do not often join hands. On the other hand the unions have not adopted any policy nor even shown any interest in the larger issues of education. Their members generally are suspicious of any outstanding ability and they have not yet learnt to value the intelligence, which they might use, of those who do not work with their hands. By contrast to the German tendency, in which leadership plays so large a part, the English movement lacks outstanding characters in control of great masses: but in this English trade unionism seems to be more deliberately democratic. It seems to be felt in England that the mind and will of the common man should not be entirely obscured by a predominant personality; and what the English lack in leadership they gain in local and personal variety and initiative.

There remains in every form of the English democratic ideal one corroding deficiency. Its exponents are generally hostile to or suspicious of intelligence: and this attitude they share with many of those who in England oppose democracy. But whereas an obsolete and inherited ideal of personal government or oligarchical privilege is not injured by repudiating intelligence, democracy cannot survive without the continuous and widespread admiration for the critical intellect. For if one's ideal is simply to do what has always been done, one's best support is a vague emotion for the "good old times"; but if the structure of society and political organisation are to be reformed, a careful and laborious criticism is the only security against relapses into sentimentalism. Neither French nor German democratic ideals suffer so much as the English from the lack of attention to reasoning. Their weaknesses are very different. But in England the chief reason why democracy stumbles in its progress and has so often to repudiate its own first efforts is that critical intelligence is undervalued. The critics of reasoning are numerous enough and the weakness of abstract calculation is obvious enough. That the anti-intellectual sentimentalists are gaining power even among the democrats of England, however, only

shows how complete is the absence of any appreciation for the true meaning and value of the work of the intellect. English democracy is muddleheaded in its attitude towards education or free religious practice. It has no clear perception of the necessity of a new educational system and no understanding of religious enthusiasm which cannot be classed under one of the hydra-heads of nonconformity. It is still obscurantist in almost every sphere of thought but the economic and political. It regards art as an aristocratic frivolity and science as a source of income. And, therefore, in moments of crisis it gives itself over, bound hand and foot by sentimentalism, to the ancient and obsolete orthodoxies even in the spheres of politics and economics.

A second and less general weakness of the English democratic ideal is its concentration upon local issues. There is no democratic view in England of the relation of states or even of the administration of the British Empire: for an oligarchic or gladiatorial view does not become democratic simply because it is held by those who in other issues are democrats, just as obsolete metaphysics does not become modern knowledge simply because it is advocated by a biologist. There is no democratic programme implied in mere opposition to older programmes: and a mere lack of interest in imperial or foreign policy leaves the democratic movement in England the simple-minded slave of diplomats and pro-consuls. These two classes of our officials intend well in their ingenious devices for complicating the problems which they are supposed to solve and, one must confess, they are probably more useful than absent-minded democrats would be who have no understanding at all of world-politics. But there is no reason why a clear-cut and original conception of imperial or foreign policy should not be elaborated upon democratic principles. And until there is such a conception we shall wait in vain for the security upon which all domestic reforms must depend.

English democracy has survived even greater deficiencies than those we have mentioned. It is already beginning to

reform itself; and perhaps when its exponents are able to distinguish the use of reasoning from the lawyer's habit of arguing, it will rise to greater heights. For the criticism which we have made is not subversive of the inner enthusiasm which is the life of the English ideal. That remains untouched and strong. It has behind it already some experience, and democratic labours have already achieved much in England. But the whole movement is young and there is every hope that the ideal may be purified from anti-intellectualism. For the faith in the value and dignity of the common man is a faith in reason and not in emotion or impulse. It is by his reason that the most foolish or the most incompetent makes of human society something more than a herd of beasts. And ultimately we must come to the humanising of social life and political organisation by giving free play to the nobler elements in every man, woman and child. Such freedom is not anarchy, nor even the repudiation of the organisation we have inherited, but it is the possibility of greater life than has so far been achieved by men; and to realise this we may still count upon the vigorous enthusiasm of English democracy.

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